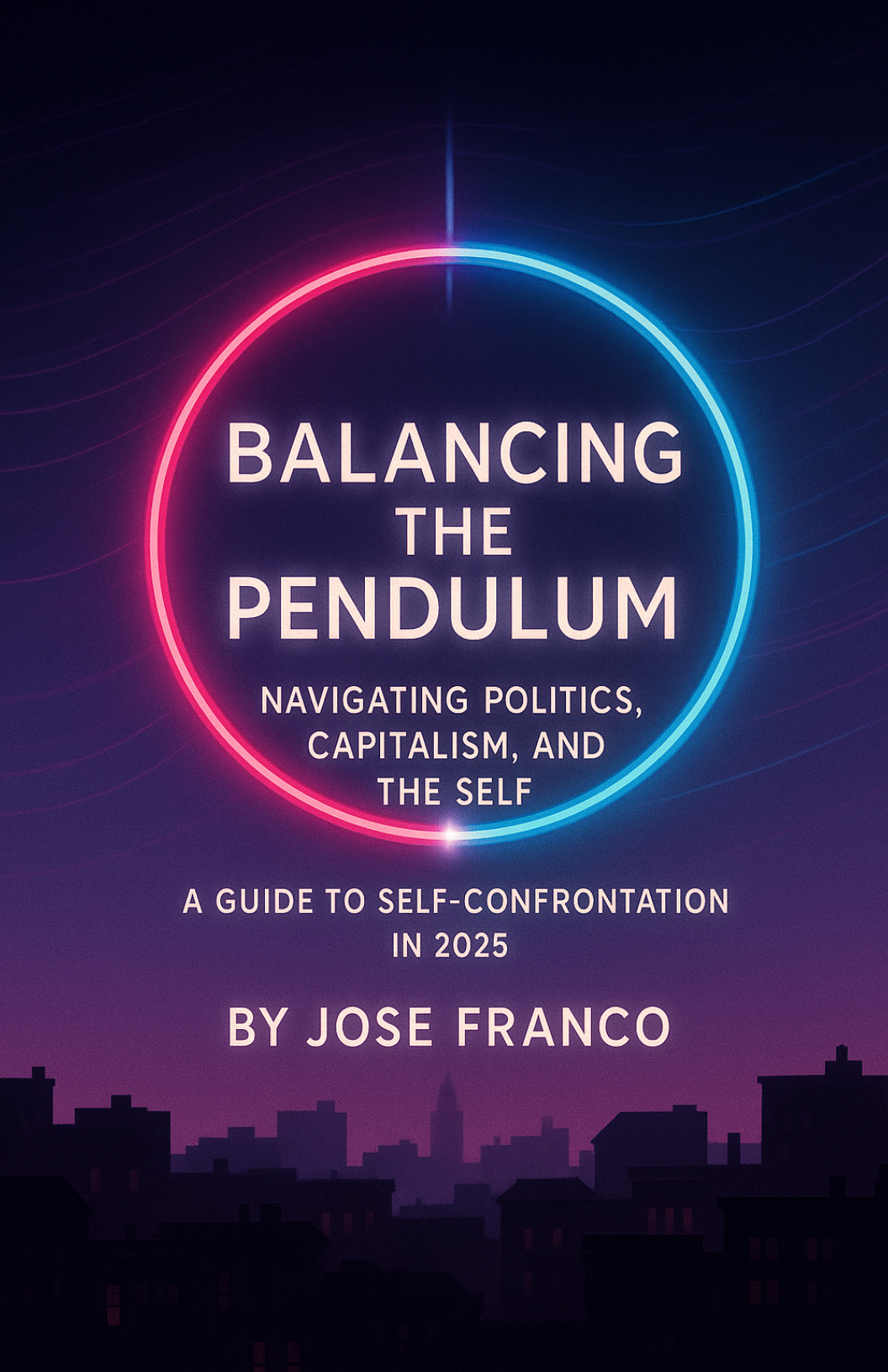
BALANCING
THE
PENDULUM
NAVIGATING POLITICS,
CAPITALISM, AND
THE SELF
A GUIDE TO SELF-CONFRONTATION
IN 2025
BY JOSE FRANCO

1

I had always viewed myself as well-intentioned, someone doing his best despite the challenges of being raised by a single mother. My paternal figures were the voices of philosophers I read—Nietzsche, Kant, Simone de Beauvoir. They shaped my understanding of morality, truth, and justice. But even with their guidance, I couldn't escape the reality of my subjectivity. Life isn't fair, and I struggled to reconcile that truth with my belief in personal responsibility.

Today, I stood before a mirror—not a literal one, but a reflective confrontation of my inner contradictions. This time, the mirror wasn't asking if I was doing my best; it was asking if I truly understood the impact of my choices. To complicate matters, Donald Trump's voice filled the room.

"Look, kid, life's not about what's fair. It's about what works. Winners understand the game and play it better than anyone else. You're overthinking everything. Success isn't about morality—it's about leverage."

His words hit a nerve. I didn't agree with him, but there was truth in the pragmatism. Trump embodied an unapologetic embrace of subjectivity, manipulating

systems for his advantage. Could my moral framework stand up against such an approach?

Nietzsche had warned me: "Beware that, when fighting monsters, you yourself do not become a monster." Was my pursuit of fairness becoming a trap—a refusal to see things as they truly were?

Research from Nature Human Behaviour (2017) shows that humans are inherently biased, often making moral judgments based on intuition rather than reason. The study revealed that moral reasoning is less about objective truth and more about post-hoc justification of gut reactions.

Reflecting on this, I questioned my certainty. Were my moral arguments simply rationalizations of my feelings, shaped by my upbringing? Simone de Beauvoir had once said, "Freedom is the source from which all significance and all values spring." Perhaps Trump's freedom—the ability to define his own rules—was what I feared most.

"Donald," I said, "what about accountability? You've built your empire on half-truths, on bending rules that others follow. Doesn't that erode trust?"

He smirked. "Trust? Trust is a commodity, Jose. It's earned, traded, and sometimes discarded. Don't waste your time looking for universal rules. If you want to fix things, play the game better."

I stepped back, unsure whether his cynicism was strength or cowardice. Freud's ideas on projection came to mind: "Everything that is unconscious in ourselves we discover in our neighbor and treat accordingly." Was I

projecting my own struggles onto him? Was his pragmatism simply a reflection of my fear to act decisively?

To ground myself, I turned to Viktor Frankl, who believed that "Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response."

I wasn't obligated to accept Trump's cynicism, but I couldn't deny the system he thrived in. If life was a game, as he suggested, could I play it without compromising my values?

I thought about studies on cooperative behavior. Research published in PNAS (2012) demonstrated that cooperation, while slower to yield benefits, often results in greater long-term success than selfish strategies.

In the end, the mirror wasn't about proving Trump wrong or asserting my philosophy as superior. It was about recognizing the shared human struggle to navigate a world without absolute answers. My moral framework wasn't fixed—it was a living thing, shaped by every decision I made.

Perhaps morality isn't a destination but a process, a commitment to align action with conscience while adapting to life's complexities. I left the confrontation with more questions than answers, but also with a deeper understanding of the path ahead.

2

I stared at the grocery receipt in my hand, a mixture of frustration and disbelief swelling inside me. Five items—just five—and the total was nearly $40. Healthy eating wasn't cheap, and it was becoming clear that the obstacles to a healthy lifestyle weren't just personal; they were systemic. Obesity wasn't simply about willpower or discipline. It was a symptom of something much larger.

The philosophers in my life were no strangers to systemic critique. Michel Foucault's ideas on power whispered from the margins of my thoughts: "Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society." Could it be that the very systems designed to nourish us had become barriers to health?

Later that day, Donald's voice surfaced again, his tone dripping with conviction.

"Jose, look at it this way—obesity is a market failure, not some moral crisis. Junk food's cheap, tasty, and profitable. If people want to eat it, that's their choice. Why fight what works?"

"But at what cost?" I countered. "The CDC reports obesity-related conditions cost the U.S. nearly $173 billion

annually. Isn't it irresponsible to ignore the societal burden?"

He shrugged. "The system isn't broken. It's working exactly as it's designed to. If you want change, Jose, you've got to design something better, not just criticize it."

Trump's cynicism forced me to reflect. Was my frustration merely moral outrage, or was it a call to action? Simone de Beauvoir's words came to mind: "The oppressor would not be so strong if he did not have accomplices among the oppressed." By choosing convenience over health, were we complicit in sustaining these systems?

Research backs what my grocery receipt had already told me. A study in JAMA Internal Medicine (2018) revealed that food deserts—areas lacking access to affordable, nutritious food—are strongly linked to obesity rates. Another study in The Lancet highlighted how ultra-processed foods, aggressively marketed and widely available, disproportionately affect low-income communities.

The system is built to encourage overconsumption. From the ubiquitous placement of junk food in checkout aisles to the relentless advertising targeting children, the deck is stacked against those striving for health. I thought about Viktor Frankl's assertion: "When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves." How could I, one person, begin to untangle this web?

Food isn't just sustenance; it's comfort, identity, and, sometimes, an escape. Freud's theories of the unconscious helped me understand this deeper layer. He wrote, "Unexpressed emotions will never die. They are buried alive and will come forth later in uglier ways." Was our collective overeating an expression of buried societal despair—a response to inequity, stress, and alienation?

The CDC cites stress as a major contributor to obesity, and stress is often systemic, linked to economic insecurity, long work hours, and lack of access to healthcare. In this light, the individual choice to overeat seemed less like a personal failing and more like an understandable reaction to an overwhelming system.

"Okay, Donald," I said aloud to no one in particular. "Let's assume the system is working exactly as designed. How do we design something better?"

His imagined reply came swiftly: "Start with incentives. Make healthy food more profitable than junk food. Tax the bad stuff if you must, but don't expect people to change without giving them something easier and better to choose."

It felt too simple, but perhaps there was truth in it. Research in Preventive Medicine (2020) showed that subsidies on fruits and vegetables significantly increased their consumption. Meanwhile, higher taxes on sugary drinks in cities like Berkeley, California, had led to measurable declines in sales.

Albert Camus' optimistic nihilism struck a chord. "The struggle itself...is enough to fill a man's heart." Fixing these

systems wouldn't happen overnight, but acknowledging their flaws and working toward solutions, however imperfect, was a worthy battle.

Obesity is a societal symptom, not just an individual challenge. It reflects our priorities, inequities, and willingness to tolerate systems that benefit a few at the expense of many. Confronting it requires more than personal discipline; it demands systemic change.

I stood in front of the mirror again, this time seeing not just my reflection but the reflection of a society grappling with its own contradictions. If the system was designed to fail so many, perhaps it was time to redesign the mirror itself.

3

Politics has always felt like a crowded room with everyone shouting but no one listening. My mother used to say, "If you can't bring peace into the room, don't go in." Yet, the more I read and wrote about politics, the more I realized how disconnected we are—from each other and from the systems that govern us. Disconnection isn't just political; it's deeply personal, affecting how we see ourselves and others.

Today, my imagined dialogue partner, Donald Trump, entered the room again, embodying a perspective that both repelled and fascinated me.

"Jose, politics is about power, not connection. People care about results, not feelings. Get the votes, win the game, and they'll respect you. All this talk about unity—it's overrated."

"Unity isn't overrated; it's necessary," I replied. "The division in this country isn't just hurting our politics—it's making people sick, isolated, and mistrustful. Studies show that loneliness and social disconnection increase mortality risk by 29%, comparable to smoking or obesity (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). This isn't just about winning or losing; it's about survival."

Trump scoffed. “That’s a nice theory, but try uniting people who hate each other. You think everyone wants the same things? They don’t. Unity is a fantasy.”

I felt the frustration Nietzsche must have felt when confronting the herd mentality. “In individuals, insanity is rare; but in groups, parties, nations, and epochs, it is the rule.” Perhaps unity wasn’t about agreement—it was about finding shared humanity despite differences.

I recalled Hannah Arendt’s exploration of how totalitarian regimes thrive on isolation. “What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness...has become an everyday experience.” In modern America, disconnection feels weaponized, amplified by algorithms that profit from outrage.

Research published in The Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology (2018) showed that limiting social media use to 30 minutes a day significantly reduces feelings of loneliness and depression. If disconnection is both political and personal, then perhaps the antidote starts with individual action.

“Donald,” I said, “if connection isn’t possible, why do people rally behind slogans like ‘Make America Great Again’? Isn’t that longing for unity, even if it’s misplaced?”

“Jose, people want greatness, not unity,” he replied. “Give them a banner to wave, and they’ll follow, as long as they feel powerful under it.”

His pragmatism reminded me of Machiavelli's The Prince, but I couldn't accept his cynicism without question. Martin Luther King Jr.'s words resonated instead: "We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools."

Case studies of bipartisan collaboration offer hope. In 2020, the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health documented how Republican and Democratic governors successfully coordinated responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, reducing mortality rates by aligning on public health measures despite political differences. If they could find common ground in a crisis, perhaps so could we.

The mirror of self-confrontation reflected back an unsettling truth: I, too, had been complicit in disconnection. My frustration with others often led me to dismiss them outright, creating the very divide I claimed to oppose. Søren Kierkegaard once wrote, "The tyrant dies and his rule is over, the martyr dies and his rule begins." Was I willing to confront my biases and take on the burden of fostering connection, even when it felt impossible?

Disconnection isn't just a societal problem; it's a deeply human one. Politics reflects the disconnection in our personal lives, magnifying its consequences. The challenge isn't to eliminate disagreement—it's to build bridges strong enough to bear its weight.

Standing before the mirror, I saw both the cynicism of Trump's pragmatism and the idealism of my philosophical

guides. The truth lay somewhere in between: connection requires effort, vulnerability, and a willingness to listen. In that moment, I committed to becoming a bridge builder, one conversation at a time.

4

There's a weight to the past, like an old scar that still aches on certain days. I've carried it with me, not realizing how much it shaped my reactions, decisions, and fears. As I stood before the mirror, I wasn't just confronting my reflection—I was confronting everything it carried. Childhood struggles, failures, broken relationships—all of it lingered in ways I hadn't fully understood.

Donald Trump appeared again, his presence both irritating and instructive. His boldness in erasing his own past fascinated me.

"Jose, the past is only a problem if you let it be. Forget it. Move on. People have short memories, anyway. Why drag old baggage into new opportunities?"

"But isn't forgetting dangerous? Doesn't it stop us from learning?"

Trump shrugged. "Learning's fine, but don't dwell. Winners don't look back; they keep moving forward. The people who get stuck in the past are losers, plain and simple."

His dismissal struck a chord. Freud's theory of repression came to mind: "Unexpressed emotions will never die. They are buried alive and will come forth later in

uglier ways." Was forgetting the same as healing, or was it just burying pain deeper?

Research in Psychological Science (2014) reveals that rumination—the repetitive focus on past events—correlates strongly with anxiety and depression. At the same time, studies in Frontiers in Psychology (2018) suggest that reprocessing past experiences through reflection or therapy promotes growth and resilience.

I realized that Trump's approach of moving on, while tempting, wasn't the same as letting go. Letting go required confronting the past, understanding it, and integrating its lessons without being controlled by it. Viktor Frankl's words resonated: "When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves."

One moment that had haunted me was an argument I had with a player I coached. He'd blamed me for his failure to make the varsity team, and his words cut deeper than I admitted. I replayed that moment for years, questioning my decisions.

But during a practice years later, another coach pulled me aside and said, "Jose, you can't carry every kid's disappointment. Your job is to guide them, not to control their path." His advice reminded me of Marcus Aurelius' stoicism: "You have power over your mind—not outside events. Realize this, and you will find strength."

"Donald," I said, "your strategy works for you, but what about accountability? Don't you think the past catches up eventually?"

"Only if you let it," he shot back. "Control the narrative. If people bring up your mistakes, tell a bigger story. Make them focus on what you're building now."

I paused. His logic wasn't entirely wrong. Humans are wired to focus on compelling stories, and studies in Nature Communications (2020) confirm that narratives shape memory. But controlling the narrative without reflection felt hollow—like painting over a crack without fixing the foundation.

Letting go, I realized, isn't about erasing the past but reframing it. Neuroscience research highlights the benefits of cognitive reappraisal—viewing past failures as stepping stones rather than defining moments.

I thought about Nelson Mandela, who emerged from 27 years in prison with a message of reconciliation, not revenge. "Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies," he once said.

If Mandela could release the burden of his past for the sake of progress, couldn't I?

Letting go of the past isn't weakness; it's a strength that requires courage and clarity. It's the art of acknowledging where we've been without letting it dictate where we're going.

As I faced the mirror, I saw not just my reflection but the shadows of my history. They weren't gone, but they were

quieter, their grip loosened by reflection and resolve. For the first time, I felt lighter—not because the weight had disappeared, but because I had learned how to carry it.

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Focus on the Process

5

There's a peculiar comfort in focusing on the outcome—it gives us a clear target, something to aim for. Yet, as I've learned on the baseball field and in life, the obsession with results often blinds us to the work that makes those results possible. The mirror of self-confrontation reminded me again: it's not the trophy that defines you, but the practices, the repetitions, and the resilience that lead to it.

As I reflected, Trump's voice intruded with its characteristic certainty.

"Jose, process is for losers. Winners set their sights on results. Nobody remembers the process—they only remember the victory."

"But what about sustainability? Winning once is easy; staying on top takes discipline and consistency. Process is the foundation for that."

He smirked. "Discipline's fine, but only if it leads to results. Otherwise, you're just wasting your time."

I could see his logic. Results are tangible; they grab attention and shape narratives. Yet, they're fleeting. Nietzsche's will to power came to mind: "The struggle for mastery lies not in the end but in the act itself." If the

process wasn't meaningful, then the victory would be hollow.

Research in The Journal of Sports Psychology (2019) reveals that athletes focused on mastery goals—improving their skills—experience less burnout and higher satisfaction than those fixated solely on outcomes. This resonates deeply with my experience as a coach: the players who celebrated incremental improvements often outperformed those obsessed with stats or wins.

One of my players, Marco, comes to mind. He struggled with his batting average, constantly fixating on his numbers. After weeks of frustration, I encouraged him to shift focus—to concentrate on his swing mechanics instead. Slowly but steadily, his confidence grew, and his performance followed. His success wasn't immediate, but it was sustainable because it was rooted in the process.

This same lesson applies to politics. Voters often demand immediate results from leaders, which incentivizes short-term thinking. Yet, as Søren Kierkegaard observed, "Life can only be understood backward, but it must be lived forward." Real change—whether in policy or health—requires patience and persistence.

A study in Public Administration Review (2021) analyzed long-term infrastructure projects, finding that administrations focused on incremental progress achieved greater success than those prioritizing quick wins for political gain.

"Donald," I said, "what about your business empire? Didn't it require years of incremental effort?"

"Sure, but nobody cared about the grind. They cared about the skyscrapers, the casinos—the big wins," he replied.

His answer reminded me of Plato's Allegory of the Cave. Most people see only the shadows on the wall—the outcomes—without understanding the work casting those shadows.

Focusing on the process also transformed my relationship with health. When I lost 70 pounds, I realized that sustainable weight loss wasn't about the number on the scale; it was about building habits: mindful eating, consistent exercise, and prioritizing sleep.

A 2022 study in Obesity Research & Clinical Practice found that individuals who focused on behavioral changes rather than weight loss alone were more likely to maintain their health over the long term.

Process is the slow, unglamorous work that sustains success. It's easy to be seduced by outcomes, but outcomes without process are like castles built on sand—they may stand for a moment, but they won't last.

As I faced the mirror again, I didn't see a finish line or a scoreboard. I saw a man in the middle of the process, and for the first time, I didn't feel the need to rush. The work itself was enough.

6

It wasn't the outside world that wore me down—it was the conversations in my head. I used to believe I was my harshest critic because I cared. But as I grew, I realized that self-criticism wasn't helping me; it was holding me back. Standing before the mirror of self-confrontation, I began to examine the power of my inner dialogue.

Donald Trump:

"Jose, let me tell you something. Confidence is everything. If you doubt yourself, you're already losing."

"But confidence isn't just bravado, Donald. It's built on a foundation of truth and self-awareness. You can't fake it forever."

He laughed. "Truth is overrated. People believe what you tell them. Tell yourself you're great, and eventually, you will be."

His response, though predictable, reminded me of Nietzsche's assertion: "Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies." Trump's conviction in his narrative had power, but was it sustainable without self-reflection?

Research in The Sport Psychologist (2017) highlights how positive self-talk improves athletic performance by reducing anxiety and enhancing focus. Yet, negative self-talk often creates a self-fulfilling prophecy, where fear of failure becomes the cause of it.

As a coach, I've seen players spiral because of one bad game. "I'm just not good enough," they'd mutter, letting their inner dialogue define their future. Changing those words—"I'll learn from this and come back stronger"—transformed their mindset and performance.

Søren Kierkegaard's existential reflections come to mind: "The most painful state of being is remembering the future, particularly one you can never have." Our inner dialogue is often trapped in imagined futures or unchangeable pasts, robbing us of the present moment.

I thought about a time I berated myself after a failed project. The words, "You should have known better," echoed for weeks. But reframing it as, "What did I learn?" shifted the focus from blame to growth.

"Donald," I said, "your confidence works for you, but what happens when the lies you tell yourself catch up?"

"They don't," he replied confidently. "Keep moving forward, and people forget your mistakes. As long as you believe in yourself, nothing else matters."

His perspective reminded me of Freud's theory of the ego: the stories we tell ourselves to maintain a sense of control. While this can be empowering, it can also be fragile if not rooted in truth.

To promote self awareness, I recommend journaling daily to identify patterns in your thoughts. Replace "I failed" with "I learned." Repeat phrases grounded in truth, such as, "I am capable of growth."

Studies in Behavior Therapy (2021) reveal that cognitive reappraisal—changing the way you think about situations—reduces stress and improves mental resilience.

Inner dialogue is a powerful tool, capable of shaping both our potential and our limitations. Like the mirror I stood before, it reflects the stories we tell ourselves. But unlike a mirror, it can be reframed to reveal a truer, kinder reflection.

As I stepped back from the mirror, I heard a new voice within me: not one of harsh criticism, but one of quiet encouragement. The first steps toward confidence were not loud—they were honest.

7

The night before my first high school baseball game, I didn't sleep. My mind was stuck, running every possible scenario: What if I miss the ball? What if I fail? Years later, I learned that the key wasn't avoiding those scenarios—it was rehearsing them in a way that prepared me to succeed. Visualization wasn't just imagining success; it was training for the moment when success became possible.

Standing before the mirror, I revisited this lesson with Donald Trump entering the frame.

"Jose, you're overcomplicating things again. Just picture the win, then go out and take it. It's that simple."

"But Donald, it's not just about seeing the win. It's about seeing the journey, every pitch, every swing, every setback. That's where the real preparation happens."

He smirked. "Details are for losers. Visualize the victory, and the rest takes care of itself."

His approach was tempting. After all, winning is what people remember. But I knew better. Nietzsche's words rang true: "He who has a why to live can bear almost any how." The "how" mattered because it was the foundation of any meaningful victory.

Research from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy in Sport (2020) shows that multi-sensory visualization—imagining sights, sounds, and feelings of performance—activates the same neural pathways as physical practice. Athletes who combine visualization with practice improve performance significantly compared to those who rely on practice alone.

I thought back to Marco, one of my players who struggled under pressure. I taught him to visualize each pitch: the feel of the bat, the sound of the ball connecting, the rush of running to first base. His anxiety subsided, and his performance soared.

"Donald," I said, "visualization isn't just for sports. What about leaders? Shouldn't they visualize the path to their goals?"

"Leaders don't need to visualize the path," he shot back. "They make the path. People follow them because they exude confidence."

His confidence was undeniable, but it reminded me of Plato's philosopher-king—the idea that true leadership required wisdom, not just charisma. Effective leaders don't just see the end goal; they anticipate challenges and prepare for them.

This lesson applies to personal health as well. When I lost 70 pounds, I didn't just visualize the weight loss; I visualized myself making better food choices, walking each morning, and feeling healthier.

How can someone lose 70 pounds in 120 days just like I did? Focus on one step at a time. For example, visualize preparing a healthy meal rather than imagining an entire weight-loss journey. Picture the textures, sounds, and emotions associated with success. Use visualization as a complement to practice, not a substitute.

Studies in Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews (2021) confirm that combining visualization with physical action reinforces neural connections, making habits more resilient.

Visualization is both a tool and a practice. It's not about guaranteeing success but about preparing for it in a way that feels tangible and achievable.

As I stepped away from the mirror, I no longer felt the weight of self-doubt. I saw the possibilities—not just the outcomes but the steps that would lead me there. For the first time, I could picture not just the end but the process itself, and that made all the difference.

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8

Breath is life, though I rarely thought about it. It happens automatically, quietly sustaining us without fanfare. But as I stood before the mirror of self-confrontation, I realized my breath was more than a biological function—it was a bridge between the chaos of the outside world and the calm I longed to cultivate within.

In this stillness, Donald Trump's voice interrupted.

"Jose, what's with all this breathing nonsense? Winners don't waste time meditating; they act. Focus on the big moves, not your breathing."

"But isn't focus built on calm? Breath is how we control the storm inside. Without that control, even the best moves fall apart."

He scoffed. "Control the storm? You ride it, Jose. That's how you win."

I considered his point. Trump's instinct to act decisively had value, but there was also wisdom in restraint. Marcus Aurelius had written, "You have power over your mind—not outside events. Realize this, and you will find strength." Breath was my entry point to that strength.

Controlled breathing engages the parasympathetic nervous system, calming the body and mind. A study in Frontiers in Psychology (2018) showed that slow, intentional breathing reduces cortisol levels and improves decision-making under stress.

As a coach, I encouraged my players to use breath to reset after mistakes. I taught them the 4-4-6 method: inhale for four counts, hold for four, exhale for six. It grounded them in moments of pressure, turning anxiety into focus.

"Donald," I said, "if breath helps us focus in sports, why not in politics? Wouldn't calm reflection lead to better decisions?"

"Calm is overrated," he replied. "Politics is about momentum, not hesitation."

While momentum has its place, I thought about Hannah Arendt's reflections on totalitarianism: "The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction...no longer exists." Without the calm to reflect, the rush of momentum risks erasing the line between truth and manipulation.

Practical Breathing Techniques

Box Breathing: Inhale for four counts, hold for four, exhale for four, hold for four.

Diaphragmatic Breathing: Place a hand on your stomach and feel it expand with each inhale.

Resonant Breathing: Inhale and exhale slowly to achieve a rhythm of five breaths per minute, shown in BMC

Complementary Medicine and Therapies (2020) to improve heart rate variability.

Breathing is both simple and profound—a way to anchor ourselves when the world feels overwhelming. It reminds us that calm isn't the absence of action but the clarity to act with intention.

As I stepped back from the mirror, my breath was steady, deliberate, and full of purpose. The storm inside me had not disappeared, but I was no longer its captive.

9

Discomfort has always been something I tried to avoid—whether it was the sting of failure, the pain of discipline, or the awkwardness of admitting I was wrong. Yet, as I stood before the mirror of self-confrontation, I realized that discomfort wasn't my enemy; it was my teacher. Growth, it seemed, required walking straight into what I feared most.

It was then that Donald Trump's voice re-entered, as confident as ever.

"Jose, nobody likes pain. Why put yourself through it? Winners find shortcuts. Discomfort slows you down."

"But growth comes from struggle, Donald. If you avoid discomfort, you avoid improvement."

He smirked. "That's what losers say when they can't win. If something hurts, you're doing it wrong."

His disdain for struggle contrasted sharply with Nietzsche's assertion: "To live is to suffer; to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering." Discomfort wasn't failure—it was proof of effort.

Research in Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (2019) shows that exposure to controlled discomfort—through challenges like exercise or difficult

conversations—builds resilience and fosters adaptability. This aligns with what I'd seen as a coach.

One year, I introduced high-pressure drills where players faced simulated game-deciding moments. At first, they panicked, missing easy plays. But over time, they grew comfortable with discomfort, thriving under pressure.

"Donald," I said, "discomfort isn't just personal—it's political. Avoiding hard truths is why so many problems persist."

"Hard truths don't win elections," he replied. "People want promises, not problems."

His pragmatism reminded me of Camus' Myth of Sisyphus. The absurdity of pushing a boulder up a hill endlessly mirrored the cyclical avoidance of systemic issues in politics. Yet, Camus argued that we must imagine Sisyphus happy—not in spite of the struggle but because of it.

Take climate change, for example. A 2021 study in Nature Climate Change found that public resistance to necessary but uncomfortable changes—like reducing consumption—stems from the human tendency to favor immediate comfort over long-term benefit.

Practical Steps to Embrace Discomfort

Start Small: Incorporate controlled discomfort into daily routines, like cold showers or public speaking.

Reframe Pain: View challenges as opportunities for growth rather than obstacles.

Track Progress: Reflect on how discomfort has led to improvement over time.

Discomfort isn't something to fear—it's something to embrace. It's the crucible through which growth, strength, and resilience are forged.

As I stepped away from the mirror, I didn't feel defeated by my discomfort. I felt grateful for it. The sting of effort was no longer a barrier; it was a reminder that I was alive and moving forward.

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10

I used to think reflection was indulgent—a way to dwell on the past rather than move forward. But as I stood before the mirror of self-confrontation, I realized reflection wasn't about looking back; it was about recalibrating for what lay ahead. To adapt, I needed to learn from what worked and, more importantly, from what didn't.

It was at this moment that Donald Trump's voice returned, his tone laced with self-assured certainty.

"Jose, forget the past. The future is what matters. Reflection is just an excuse for hesitation."

"But Donald, without reflection, how do we know what to improve? Adaptation isn't hesitation—it's evolution."

"Evolution is for survival," he said. "Winners create their reality. They don't waste time analyzing what's behind them."

I thought of Hegel's dialectics: "The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk." Wisdom often comes in hindsight, but that doesn't mean it's too late to act on it.

Research in Harvard Business Review (2014) reveals that structured reflection improves learning and performance by 23%. The act of pausing to evaluate strengthens neural pathways, enhancing decision-making.

I saw this firsthand with my team. After each game, we held a reflection session—not to assign blame but to identify lessons. These conversations transformed individual mistakes into collective growth.

"Donald," I said, "adaptation is what keeps us relevant. Whether in politics or personal growth, ignoring change is a losing strategy."

"Change is overrated," he replied. "If you're strong enough, you don't need to change—people adapt to you."

His confidence reminded me of Darwin's observation: "It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most adaptable to change." The ability to pivot wasn't weakness; it was resilience.

Take climate policy, for example. A 2022 study in Nature Sustainability found that nations with flexible, adaptive strategies achieved greater success in reducing emissions than those clinging to rigid frameworks. Reflection isn't paralysis; it's preparation.

Spend 5 minutes at the end of each day noting successes, challenges, and lessons. Seek input from others to gain perspectives you might overlook. Use reflections to create specific, measurable steps for improvement.

Reflection isn't about dwelling on mistakes; it's about using them as stepping stones for progress. Adaptation isn't just a survival tactic—it's a means of thriving in a world that's constantly changing.

As I stepped away from the mirror, I felt a renewed sense of purpose. My mistakes weren't weights holding me down—they were tools sharpening me for what was to come.

11

As I reflected on my journey, I realized that one of the most important aspects of both personal and collective growth is synergy. The idea that individual contributions can amplify each other in a supportive environment was something I'd learned over time, especially in coaching. Yet, synergy wasn't just about getting along—it was about accountability, shared responsibility, and fostering trust. As I stood before the mirror of self-confrontation, I saw how these principles applied not only to a team but to every relationship in my life.

Donald Trump:

"Jose, you're talking about harmony, but I'm talking about winning. You need people who follow you, not ones who challenge you all the time. Accountability? That's for when things go wrong. When you're winning, nobody cares who's accountable."

"I disagree. Accountability is what makes success meaningful. Without it, you're just riding momentum, hoping it doesn't crash."

Trump looked at me skeptically. "So, you want people to call each other out? Fine. But remember, it only works if you're winning."

Research in The Journal of Applied Psychology (2019) suggests that accountability enhances both individual performance and team collaboration. Teams that hold each other accountable for their actions are more likely to succeed in complex tasks because they foster a culture of mutual trust and respect. This isn't just about holding people responsible—it's about creating an environment where everyone's growth contributes to the team's overall success.

In my own experience, this was apparent. I've coached teams that thrived on open communication and shared responsibility. When players felt accountable not just to me but to each other, they pushed harder and worked smarter. One team in particular, despite facing immense pressure, held themselves to high standards, encouraging each other during tough moments. Their resilience didn't come from avoiding mistakes but from learning from them together.

Søren Kierkegaard's existential philosophy speaks to the importance of individual responsibility. He said, "The most terrifying thing is to accept oneself completely." In a team, this acceptance is key. True accountability doesn't lie in criticism—it lies in embracing one's role and the collective role of the team. But, as Friedrich Nietzsche warns, "He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster." Accountability is a fine line—it demands honesty but also compassion.

Practical Steps to Foster Team Accountability

Establish Clear Expectations: Outline what accountability looks like within your group. Make sure everyone understands their role. Create spaces where feedback is focused on growth, not blame. Acknowledge when team efforts lead to success, reinforcing the idea that everyone's contribution matters.

Synergy and accountability are two sides of the same coin. One without the other creates imbalance. As I looked into the mirror, I saw not only my own growth but the collective growth that occurs when we embrace both personal responsibility and mutual support. In the end, success is more meaningful when it's shared—whether in sports, business, or relationships.

12

By now, I'd learned that the most powerful way to engage with challenging ideas wasn't to fight them head-on but to understand them from the inside out. The Iron Man Argument, as I call it, is the practice of engaging with opposing viewpoints in their strongest form, not their weakest. It's about striving to understand an argument so well that you can present it in a way that its proponents would agree with. This intellectual honesty was the heart of the philosophy I'd cultivated over the years.

Donald Trump:

"You're wasting time, Jose. If you really want to succeed, you need to destroy your opponents, not give them respect."

"Respect is not about agreeing, Donald. It's about understanding. To engage with someone, I need to see their argument as fully as they do. Only then can we have a meaningful exchange."

Trump grinned. "Maybe, but it's easier to win by playing the game dirty. You don't need to understand your opponent—you need to crush them."

This exchange reminded me of Nietzsche's critique of traditional morality. "The greatest events—they are not our

greatest moments, but the greatest moments of others. They have no meaning except for their connection to others."Winning, in the way Trump described, was about imposing meaning. But true victory comes in understanding—not just of others but of oneself in relation to them.

Research in Cognitive Science (2015) supports the concept of the Iron Man Argument. Studies show that people who understand opposing viewpoints deeply are more likely to engage in constructive dialogue and arrive at better solutions. Intellectual empathy—the ability to see the world through the eyes of those we disagree with—does not mean we have to agree with them; it means we approach their ideas with respect and open-mindedness.

In my own writing and coaching, I had experienced the power of engaging fully with opposing ideas. When I wrote my op-eds, I forced myself to write counterarguments before developing my own positions, not just to strengthen my arguments, but to refine my own understanding.

"Donald," I said, "what if the key to bridging the political divide wasn't to double down on our own positions but to understand each other's perspectives more deeply?"

He raised an eyebrow. "I've been in politics long enough to know that's naive."

"But what if it's the only way forward?" I persisted. "Studies in Political Psychology (2020) suggest that understanding and addressing the underlying fears and

needs of our opponents reduces polarization and fosters cooperation."

This wasn't just about politics. It was about our common humanity. If we could approach disagreement with the same intellectual rigor and empathy that we reserve for our own ideas, we could create more space for dialogue and less for division.

The Iron Man Argument isn't just about defending your position; it's about challenging your own understanding of the world. In doing so, you don't just strengthen your beliefs; you grow in wisdom. As I faced the mirror once more, I realized that engaging with opposing viewpoints fully was a practice of humility, not weakness. It was the way forward—not just in politics, but in life.

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13

As I stood before the mirror, I realized that the role of a father wasn't just biological. It was philosophical, emotional, and profoundly societal. A father shapes the trajectory of a child's life, not only by what he teaches but by what he exemplifies. As I considered the world around me—marked by political strife and social fractures—it became clear that fatherhood, in its most authentic form, is a model for leadership, responsibility, and accountability. A father, like a leader, has the power to influence the future, for better or worse. The voice of Donald in my head chimed in,

"Jose, you're overthinking it. You want me to be the perfect father, the perfect man? That's a fairy tale. Real men make things happen. Fathers provide, that's it. They don't need to be role models—they need to be strong."

"Strength isn't just about power. It's about wisdom. A father must lead by example, not just force."

Trump leaned in, unbothered. "You think the country's going to fix itself with all this 'wisdom' stuff? People need a figure to follow, someone who leads with action, not thoughts."

But as I reflected, I couldn't deny the importance of role models. The philosopher John Stuart Mill once said, "A person who has nothing for which he is willing to fight, nothing which is more important than his own personal safety, is a miserable creature and has no chance of being free." A father, like any leader, is tasked with fighting for the well-being of others, even when it requires sacrifice.

Studies from The American Journal of Family Therapy (2018) show that fathers who actively engage in their children's emotional and educational lives positively impact their development, especially in fostering independence, resilience, and empathy. It's the balance of authority and affection that creates a strong foundation for future success.

I thought about my own experiences. Raised by a single mother, I often looked to other male figures—philosophers, coaches, and mentors. Their intellectual and moral lessons were my guiding principles. But there was something missing: the hands-on accountability of a father who leads by living his values. That gap shaped me, and it's something I've been striving to fill in my own life.

Fathers, in their roles as protectors and providers, must also be exemplars of accountability. Aristotle argued that a just society depends on individuals who can act virtuously. This applies to fathers as well; they must teach responsibility, not only by their words but through consistent actions. In politics, the absence of moral

leadership creates vacuums of power where manipulation thrives.

I thought about the father figures in politics. Franklin D. Roosevelt led a divided nation through the Great Depression, yet his vision and commitment to his ideals earned him the trust of the people. A father's leadership isn't about control—it's about nurturing the potential for growth in others.

Practical Steps for Fostering Leadership in Fatherhood

Lead by Example: Demonstrate integrity in all actions.

Prioritize Emotional Engagement: Actively listen to your children, addressing their emotional needs.

Teach Accountability: Encourage responsibility, not just for personal actions but for the collective well-being.

Create Space for Growth: Allow room for mistakes and teach resilience through adversity.

Fatherhood is the quiet but profound foundation upon which the future is built. Leaders who guide through understanding and accountability, who lead with both strength and vulnerability, shape a more just society. As I looked into the mirror, I saw a reflection not just of my past but of the father I aspire to be—a man capable of leading with wisdom, compassion, and integrity.

14

As Christmas approaches, I find myself reflecting on the past year and contemplating what lies ahead in 2025. This season of gratitude forces me to confront the power of introspection. It's a time to pause and reconsider my choices—especially my decision to step back from writing publicly and sharing on social media for an entire year. I've chosen to listen more and speak less, seeking clarity rather than external validation. This time of reflection has illuminated the tension I experience between the forceful, unyielding voice of Donald Trump (on tv and in my head) and my own desire to act with love and vulnerability.

"Jose, you're overthinking again. The world moves fast, and people admire strength. If you keep questioning everything, you'll miss your chance. Fear drives action, and action drives success."

"But Donald, the real strength is in overcoming fear—choosing love and understanding, not just pushing through pain. Fear may fuel success in the short term, but love sustains long-term change."

Fear may ignite action, but love fosters resilience. Scientific studies, including those from Psychology Today (2021), reveal how fear-driven decisions lead to stress and burnout, whereas love—whether in relationships, empathy, or self-compassion—promotes healing and long-term well-being. The paradox of capitalism shows this tension: capitalism thrives on fear—fear of losing, fear of not having enough—but it is love and trust that can bring lasting change.

For me, stepping back from the noise of social media is an act of love—a commitment to deepening my understanding without the distraction of validation. This shift towards reflection, guided by philosophers like David Hume, allows me to question my assumptions and confront my biases.

In capitalism, money represents the pursuit of security and success, but it's also a shared narrative—a social construct. As I reflect on my own journey from jewelry sales to founding Stoop Juice, I realize how money shaped my choices, both as a tool for growth and as a source of anxiety. Capitalism rewards those who navigate its challenges, but it also perpetuates inequality, leveraging fear to push people toward consumption.

Money is a paradox. It can be a tool for collective growth or a mechanism for reinforcing division. In my book Country Before Party, I argued that self-confrontation through personal growth can help dismantle the systemic inequities capitalism creates. Understanding money as a human invention—not a law of nature—invites us to imagine

a society where wealth doesn't equate to success, but rather to a shared commitment to equality and collective progress.

Trump's nationalist rhetoric promises clarity and pride, rallying those who feel alienated by the current state of the world. His approach is simple: take bold action, win, and don't look back. But I see a different path. As I reflect on the broader societal implications of his policies, I realize that personal evolution—the kind of growth that stems from self-awareness and introspection—could be the antidote to the very divides that nationalism seeks to address. Both approaches have merit, but they must coexist in order to heal the fractures in American society.

The truth is, we cannot only act out of fear, nor can we only reflect without action. Leadership—whether in the family, in business, or in politics—demands a balance of strength and vulnerability. As I stand before the mirror, reflecting on the past year, I see that love—not fear—must be the driving force behind meaningful action.

Replace fear-driven decisions with choices rooted in love and empathy. Step into uncomfortable situations knowing that growth comes from embracing discomfort. View fear as a signal for change, not as something to avoid. Engage with others' pain and struggles, not from a place of judgment but with a desire to understand.

Choosing love over fear doesn't mean avoiding challenges or pretending that fear doesn't exist. It means

choosing how we respond to fear—by grounding our decisions in love, empathy, and shared purpose. As I reflect on the impact of my actions, I see that love is the bridge between my fears and my potential. It's not the absence of fear that makes us strong, but our ability to act with love in spite of it.

15

After submitting my thoughts to the New York Times and the Washington Post and receiving polite rejections, I found a surprising sense of gratitude. In a world obsessed with external validation, rejection has become a reminder of my own insignificance—something I've embraced and found liberating. This rejection is not a failure but an opportunity for self-reflection, pushing me to measure my work against my internal values. It's a humbling lesson that true growth begins from within, not from the applause of others.

In the context of the growing influence of Latinos in the United States, we must recognize that with this power comes great responsibility—not just to our community but to the broader society. Our votes should not simply be a reaction to the "least worst" option but a deliberate choice to shape a better future. It's easy to fall into the trap of voting based on party lines, but as philosopher Karl Popper has wisely stated, "All leaders, regardless of party, should be scrutinized." We must continue to vote because it is our civic duty, and through our votes, we maintain power over our collective future, even if the choices feel far from perfect.

Michael Singer's quote, "death is the best teacher," strikes a chord, reminding me that public figures like Trump

and even Rush Limbaugh are no different from the rest of us—they all share the same inevitable fate. Fame and power are fleeting, and it's this awareness that often draws me to the idea of publishing anonymously. In a fame-driven world, the pursuit of recognition often clashes with the humility I wish to cultivate.

In reflecting on modern intellectuals like Alain de Botton and Jordan Peterson, I am confronted with two contrasting views of society. De Botton critiques the obsessive chase for fame and status, urging us to turn inward toward emotional intelligence, self-knowledge, and love, as opposed to external recognition. In his view, politicians often exploit our hunger for acknowledgment, solidifying their power. This idea resonates with me as a reminder that true fulfillment comes not from external recognition, but from within.

Peterson, in contrast, embraces the tension between chaos and order, advocating for personal responsibility in the face of life's complexities. Yet, when he endorsed Donald Trump in 2024, a paradox arose. How can a figure driven by personal gain and fame align with Peterson's moral framework of virtue and responsibility? Peterson views Trump as a necessary disruptor of globalist forces, but many of Trump's actions seem at odds with the very principles of virtue Peterson champions.

Unlike Peterson, I aim to distance myself from the trappings of fame and political ambition. A post I once shared on social media said, "The lust for fame is the last thing wise men conquer." For me, the critique extends beyond personal relationships to the broader societal

paradoxes we navigate. I see political and social systems as flawed, often amplifying our weaknesses instead of elevating our altruistic potential.

This brings me to George Carlin, whose nihilistic view of politics resonates deeply with me. Like Carlin, who grew up near Columbia University and experienced the absence of a stable paternal figure, I share his profound disillusionment with the political system. His rejection of politics as meaningful rings true for me, especially considering the absurdity that often underpins our political machines. But unlike Carlin, I continue to vote—not out of faith in the system, but out of a sense of responsibility. Our political figures are reflections of our collective flaws, and that's why engaging with the system is crucial, even if it feels futile at times.

Where de Botton advocates for focusing inward for fulfillment, and Peterson stresses individual responsibility in the face of chaos, Carlin dismisses these notions altogether, viewing politics as a meaningless pursuit. I too acknowledge the absurdity of it all but still engage in the process, embracing what I call the Sisyphean task of confronting human fallibility through active participation.

I differ from these thinkers in my embrace of "optimistic nihilism." I believe that while life may lack inherent meaning, we can still create purpose through compassion, self-reflection, and awareness. This isn't chaos for the sake of virtue, nor is it just about personal satisfaction. It's an active, deliberate effort to carve out meaning in a world that often feels devoid of it.

When I look at figures like Trump and Kamala Harris, I see two individuals deeply invested in the pursuit of fame and power. Both perpetuate the illusion of meritocracy—the flawed belief that success is purely earned, not inherited or manipulated. Peterson's endorsement of Trump inadvertently plays into the very forces he seeks to critique, while Harris's rise exemplifies the same systemic flaws, albeit through a different lens.

For me, the antidote to nihilism isn't fame or power; it's moral growth achieved through introspection, compassion, and selflessness. The path forward requires resisting the lure of external validation, staying true to one's moral compass, and cultivating purpose in the present moment.

Ultimately, I aim to remove myself from the equation. The irony is that my name remains attached to these reflections, but that's the challenge we all face: to critique power without succumbing to it, to resist fame while seeking purpose, and to measure our happiness by the voice of our conscience rather than public recognition.

There are times when I grow frustrated with the limitations of language, particularly when confronted with labels like atheist or agnostic and the stigmas they carry. Yet, I remind myself of a simple truth: our relationship with the divine—whether we call it God, fate, or the forces beyond our control—is much like our relationship with the sun. If we've hidden from the sun for years and then step into the light, it shines as if we've never been away. There is no need for apology or explanation—just turn toward it. The same can be said for reconnecting with something greater than ourselves.

While my words may never grace the pages of major publications, the act of writing itself has become the reward. In their rejection, I've found freedom. The key is to continue listening to that inner voice—free from the need for external validation—and to encourage others to do the same. The true essence of growth lies in this commitment to self-reflection, regardless of external circumstances.

Imagine the moment I sit down to play chess, a reflection of my own inner dialogue. The board is set, and the pieces are more than just shapes—they represent facets of my thoughts. The white king, cautious and reflective, mirrors my instinct to slow down and contemplate, a legacy of philosophers like Pascal. The black queen, powerful and decisive, embodies Trump's voice that demands action, dominance, and clarity. My task is to play—not by giving in to one side or the other, but by navigating the space between, using each piece as a metaphor for the balance I strive for in life. The game continues, as it always does, but the reflection from the chessboard offers me a choice: Do I play to win the game of life with the quiet strength of self-confrontation, or do I succumb to the short-term victories driven by external forces?

This moment, at the chessboard, becomes my self-talk in the present moment—a constant dance between humility and ambition, reflection and action, love and fear. The true game is not about winning, but in understanding the value of the process itself. The game is the reflection. The victory is the understanding.